

## Democracy in Danger S6 E4: “Resisting Russia’s War”

*[Show tape]*

[00:00:00] **Rebecca Barry:** Well, first, I want to check — Diana, are you safe at this time? Is everything OK where you are?

[00:00:06] **Diana Razumova:** Yeah. Just a few seconds before our meeting, our air alert has ended, so everything is OK right now.

[00:00:12] **RB:** Wow.

[00:00:12] **Leena Fraihat:** That’s so good to hear.

[00:00:14] **RB:** Yeah, for sure.

### [MUSIC IN]

*[00:00:19] News tape, reporter 1: Moscow says it launched a massive retaliatory strike in response to an attack last week in Russia’s Bryansk region, which borders Ukraine. [Fading under.]*

[00:00:28] **DR:** Thank you so much. When I first heard about the idea of this project, I was so excited to just share what I’m living in, what’s actually happening in Ukraine for more than one year.

*[00:00:43] News tape, translator 1: “They are destroying our city. I go to bed and don’t know if I will wake up the next day.”*

*[00:00:47] News tape, reporter 1: The assault included 81 missiles plus exploding drones and killed at least six people. Hundreds of thousands more lost power.*

[00:00:59] **Will Hitchcock:** Well, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine has entered its second year, and it continues to drag on with no end in sight.

### [MUSIC OUT]

*[00:01:09] News tape, translator 2: “I heard a very loud explosion.”*

*[00:01:12] News tape, translator 3: “One meter left or right, and it could have been my apartment. I have no words.”*

[00:01:17] **Steve Parks:** On this side of the Atlantic, the main concern seems to be the wider ramifications of this conflict.

*[00:01:22] News tape, Rafael Mariano Grossi, director general of the IAEA: How can we sit here ...*

[00:01:23] **SP:** Will it destabilize the European Union?

*[00:01:25] News tape, RMG: ... and allow this to happen?*

[00:01:27] **SP:** Disrupt the global economy?

[00:01:28] *News tape, reporter 2: ... the missiles damaged energy infrastructure.*

[00:01:31] *News tape, RMG: This cannot go on.*

[00:01:33] **SP:** Exacerbate already tense U.S.-China relations?

[00:01:35] *News tape, RMG: I am astonished.*

[00:01:36] *News tape, reporter 3: Chinese President Xi Jinping has arrived in Moscow for his first visit since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine last year.*

[00:01:42] **WH:** But for Ukrainians like Diana Razumova, who lives in Kharkiv, near the eastern front of the war, fearing for your life is a daily reality.

[00:01:53] **Show tape, DR:** You know, every day I have seen ruined houses and Russian tanks. Every day I have heard explosions, really terrifying explosions, because I’m living near the border with Russia. And it was so scary.

## [THEME MUSIC]

[00:02:10] **WH:** This is *Democracy in Danger*. I’m Will Hitchcock.

[00:02:14] **SP:** And I’m Steve Parks, sitting in for Siva.

[00:02:17] **WH:** And today, we’re revisiting the devastating consequences of Vladimir Putin’s campaign to bring Ukraine to its knees.

[00:02:25] *News tape, reporter 4: A victory lap of sorts for President Putin — driving himself through Mariupol. [Fading under.]*

[00:02:29] **WH:** So far, the Russian leader’s plan has failed, but the cost has been tremendous.

[00:02:35] *News tape, R4: [Fading back in.] ... the Ukrainian port city in May, damaging or destroying nearly all of its buildings.*

[00:02:38] **WH:** Since February 24, 2022, some 200,000 Russian troops have died. On the Ukrainian side, foreign observers estimate 120,000 soldiers have been killed. The civilian death toll to date could be as high as 20,000.

[00:02:57] *News tape, reporter 5: The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Putin for alleged war crimes —*

[00:03:02] **WH:** And more than 8 million Ukrainian refugees are now scattered around Europe and beyond.

[00:03:07] *News tape, R5: — including the abduction of thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia.*

[00:03:12] **SP:** Today, we’re going to hear from a couple of brave people living in direct contact with this war. And we’re going to learn what they’re doing to lay the groundwork for a safer life, a freer life, in both Ukraine and in Russia. The first is the high school student whose voice you heard a moment ago.

[00:03:30] **Show tape, DR:** Hi, my name is Diana. I’m 16 years old. I am recording from Kharkiv, Ukraine, and today’s date is March 14, 2023 ... [Fading under.]

[00:03:39] **WH:** And Rebecca Barry, our assistant producer, caught up with Diana last week and is in the studio with us now.

Rebecca, welcome.

[00:03:47] **RB:** Thanks, Will.

[00:03:48] **WH:** Rebecca, tell us about Diana. Who is she?

[00:03:50] **RB:** Yeah. So Diana is a student originally from Mariupol. This is a city in the south that suffered terrible losses early in the war. It was pummeled and occupied by the Russian forces. Ukraine had to surrender the city last May. Diana left Mariupol for Kharkiv when she was younger, back before Russian backed separatists began fighting the Ukrainian government in 2014. But she still has a lot of family in Mariupol.

[00:04:13] **Show tape, DR:** I have communications with them, you know, like, once per week, because their connection was really bad, and they don’t have electricity for two months, I think, if I’m not mistaken. And also, there were a lot of Russians in their city already. So, they cannot share with me all the truth.

[00:04:32] **RB:** Kharkiv is in the northeast. It’s relatively close to the border with Russia. Just days before Diana spoke to us, there were missile strikes there and around the country. We got in touch with her because she’s participating in a sort of intellectual exchange with American students, actually, in one of Steve’s English courses here at UVa. So, Steve, would you like to say something about that course and how it’s set up?

[00:04:55] **SP:** Sure. It’s an advanced writing course. The idea of the course is to put students of the same generation in contact with their peers internationally — young adults who are in war zones, conflicts, living under authoritarian regimes. The class is actually talking to students in the Ukraine and in Myanmar. To end result will be a book that we will publish and circulate globally. And, Rebecca, I think you had a chance to put one of my students, Leena Fraihat, in a Zoom conversation with Diana, right?

[00:05:24] **RB:** That’s correct.

[00:05:25] **Show tape, LF:** My name is Leena. I’m 20 years old. And I’m from Vienna, Virginia. [Fading under.]

[00:05:29] **RB:** Leena is a second-year student here at UVa, and she had a lot to say about the opportunity to engage with students from all over the world and have conversations about democracy. And so, connecting with Diana was a real highlight for her, I think, of this year.

[00:05:43] **Show tape, LF:** I really value speaking to people who’ve had different experiences ... [Fading under.]

[00:05:47] **RB:** Leena is somebody who’s lived abroad. She went to international school in Qatar.

[00:05:52] **Show tape, LF:** ... I’m a firm believer that our experiences make us who we are ...

[00:05:57] **RB:** And Diana was really excited to hear about that.

*[Show tape]*

[00:06:00] **DR:** You know, for me, it’s been something absolutely unbelievable.

[00:06:03] **LF:** I felt a really similar thing hearing about your story. I, I just was in awe of, of your drive to move forward ... [Fading under.]

[00:06:13] **WH:** So, what is it you and Leena learned from speaking with Diana about what her life has been like in the past year?

[00:06:19] **RB:** Yeah, Diana in particular had a vivid recollection of what the early days of the war was like. And, actually, I’m going to let Lena tee up that part of the conversation.

*[Show tape]*

[00:06:28] **LF:** Can you kind of walk me through, you know, from the beginning of the conflict to now, what can you tell me as someone who is kind of outside of that sphere?

[00:06:41] **DR:** Yeah, you know, when everything was starting, I just — I didn’t believe in it.

## [MUSIC IN]

[00:06:51] In evening, February 23, I was going to sleep, and I just wrote to all my friends, “Oh, tomorrow we will meet in school. And this weekend we will have a meeting on some projects.” And once this Thursday started, 24 February 2022, I woke up not because of explosions, as a lot of people in my city, but I woke up because of messages in my phone: “Diana, are you safe?” And I just — I didn’t understand anything. [Fading under.]

[00:07:20] **RB:** So, Diana was describing to us how there was this count, where every day they would keep track and they would say —

[00:07:26] **Show tape, DR:** ... is the third day of the invasion ...

[00:07:28] **RB:** “This is the third day of the invasion. This is the fourth day of the invasion.” But for her, it didn’t really hit home until several months later.

[00:07:36] **Show tape, DR:** And, you know, when there were 100 days of the war, I started to understand — it’s real war. Like, you know, I couldn’t believe in it for a really long time.

**[MUSIC OUT]**

[00:07:53] **SP:** Yeah, that that sense of, like, coming to understand what’s happening was also true of my students who were corresponding with Diana and her classmates. Over the weeks they learned that all of the students they were writing with are dispersed throughout Ukraine — because of the violence they had to flee where they were originally living. And in the last email from Diana’s teacher, she highlighted that the students might be a bit late responding to my UVA students because they’d just been bombed and they had no Internet, no electricity, but they promised to get the work done. And I wonder, how does Diana handle sort of these day-to-day pressures of the war while still trying to have somewhat of a normal life?

[00:08:30] **RB:** Yeah, it’s a great question. Diana, first and foremost is still a student, and so I got the sense that she’s putting her schoolwork first. She is staying hugely organized. She tells us she has a timetable to make sure that she’s keeping up with her schoolwork. She’s also an activist. She started a project through her school providing online therapy for young people all across Ukraine who have been traumatized by the war. And she’s been helping on the front lines with her stepfather.

[00:08:55] **Show tape, DR:** When the full-scale war started, from the first days, me and my dad, we started making supplies for citizens in Kharkiv. And we have supplied humanitarian aid to the people from the territories that were bombed the most. And in Kharkiv we have one district that is absolutely ruined, and there we brought this aid. Then, that summer, when I felt the scale of this tragedy for Ukraine, I created a project for Ukrainians, with psychological help, because — it’s really hard. I’m still scared of different thousands of explosions and of power outages. So, you know, I still try to do what I could do, every day.

[00:09:42] **WH:** Wow. So, she’s taken up the mantle of humanitarian work in the midst of all of this. That can’t be easy for such a young person.

[00:09:49] **RB:** No, it isn’t. And she discussed with us a moment for her that was a turning point in her understanding of how much information needs to get out to people around the world. She has relatives, as we mentioned at the top of the show, who are still in Mariupol, a place that used to have more than 400,000 residents — it is now, by estimates, down to about 100,000 due to how many evacuations there have been.

[00:10:11] **Show tape, DR:** And one day, I have ... [Fading under.]

[00:10:13] **RB:** And she ran into a woman —

[00:10:16] **Show tape, DR:** And I got to know that she was from Mariupol, my home city.

[00:10:20] **RB:** — who was willing to talk about the —

[00:10:23] **Show tape, DR:** ... terrible bombing ...

[00:10:23] **RB:** — scale of the destruction —

[00:10:25] **Show tape, DR:** ... in this city there were no minutes without an explosion. [Fading under.]

[00:10:29] **RB:** — and the crimes that have been committed there, in ways that her relatives were not forthcoming to her about. And so, Diana spoke to this woman who told her exactly what conditions have been like. And they sounded horrible.

[00:10:44] **Show tape, DR:** Like, you know, people just living in basements for months, where people cannot eat anything. It was really hard for me to hear. [Fading under.]

[00:10:52] **RB:** And this conversation took her from writing notes about her experience to writing a full-fledged creative essay.

[00:11:00] **DR:** And I started writing an essay from the perspective of the person who is living in Mariupol.

[00:11:06] **RB:** And this is an essay that you can still read, in English, on [Medium](#). And guys, it is so compelling. I just want to read to you a little bit of that essay:

[00:11:13] “We were sitting, as always, in the bomb shelter when the Russian soldiers came in.

### [MUSIC IN]

“At first, they checked all our phones — or, rather, those that were charged. They killed everyone who had any Ukrainian things on their phones. My friend, a few women, and several men were killed in front of my eyes. Other men were drafted into the occupiers’ troops. Why must innocent people go fight others?”

[00:11:48] And you know what strikes me as soon as I finish this passage is that when she talks about innocent people going to fight others, it’s left a little ambiguous whether she’s referring to the Ukrainians who have just been drafted or the Russians who have also been drafted and sent into this war against their will.

[00:12:08] **SP:** So, one of the things I’ve learned from working with advocates is how hard they try not to demonize their opponent because at one point they want to live in peace, and if they demonize them, they’re never going to be able to find that common humanity. And this is something my students have a very hard time understanding — why the advocates aren’t full of rage and anger at the folks who are doing these incredible acts of atrocity.

### [MUSIC OUT]

So, I’m just wondering, how did *Leena* react to what she learned about Diana’s life and her circumstances that she’s living in?

[00:12:39] **RB:** I think she was really inspired by the degree to which Diana is able to take up activism in her immediate community. For *Leena*, she talked about how conversation and engaging in dialogue was really important to her. But I think she came away from this wanting to

take a more active role, finding ways to start proposing solutions or tackling problems that have often been overlooked in the immediate community.

[00:13:01] **Show tape, LF:** One aspect of your story that really stuck out to me was this kind of drive to continue to create impact on those around you. You know, a large part of my personal identity is the fact that I’m Palestinian. I grew up hearing and kind of experiencing the occupation. So, I think we have a little bit of a responsibility to speak up about certain things and kind of be active. And I think 10 to 20 years down the road, I would like to be in a position where I’m doing good —

## [MUSIC IN]

— impacting those that are around me, whatever that may be. I don’t think I have a specific image, but I think I just would like to be making an impact.

[00:13:53] **WH:** And what about Diana? What are her hopes for the future?

[00:13:56] **RB:** Diana has really high hopes for herself. She talked about wanting to join the UN in the future, become a politician in Ukraine, fight for human rights. And she has recently won a scholarship, which will allow her to continue her education in the United States.

*[Show tape]*

[00:14:11] **DR:** I really hope that for our future, for Ukrainian future, this terrible war and these terrible crimes against humanity stop. You know, we still need to fight. We still need to work to make Ukraine peaceful again. And I’m proud to help my country, that my help is needed. So, I have started looking more deeper in the problems that exist, and not only about my priorities, but I have started to think more global. And in my personal future, I would like to work with world communities and fighting for human rights on different international diplomatic platforms.

[00:14:54] **LF:** I just — I’ve really, really enjoyed speaking to you, Diana, and I think you’re so well-spoken, and I think it was really just great being able to, like, talk to you one-on-one. And I just want to thank you for that.

[00:15:07] **DR:** Thank you so much. It was so nice to meet you and talk to you.

[00:15:17] **WH:** Well, Rebecca, thank you for bringing us that story.

[00:15:21] **RB:** My pleasure, thank you.

## [MUSIC OUT]

And guys, I want to mention just one more thing. I actually had help producing that interview from our colleague [Samyuktha Mahadevan](#) at the Karsh Institute. She runs [One Small Step](#) in partnership with the oral history program at StoryCorps. There’s a link to Diana and Leena’s entire conversation [on our website](#).

## [TRANSITION MUSIC]

[00:15:50] **WH:** Steve, our listeners may not realize this, but you have been a vital friend of the show over the past couple of years. Through your work with the Karsh Institute’s Democratic

Futures Project, you’ve been bringing some extraordinarily brave pro-democracy activists to the University of Virginia. A few of them have been our guests on *Democracy in Danger*.

[00:16:08] **SP:** It’s been a, sort of a, tremendous opportunity for these folks to be on *Democracy in Danger*. So many of them, because of their activism, have been either compelled or forced out of their home country. And when they live in exile, they lose a platform, really, to broadcast their concerns, their beliefs, and to sort of continue their advocacy. This podcast has been a very valuable tool for them to sort of continue that work.

[00:16:31] **WH:** Well, recently you and I had the chance to speak with a Russian advocate for peace who has challenged Putin’s regime. And in part because of her advocacy, she has been living in self-imposed exile with her family since 2015.

[00:16:45] **SP:** Right. Her name is Evgeniya Chirikova. And her activism actually began in environmentalism but through the years has expanded. Beginning in 2011, she became one of the leading figures who protested the Russian parliamentary elections. And that kind of changed her lens from environmentalism to politics. The U.S. State Department recognized Evgeniya with an International Women of Courage Award. More recently, she’s been working to help the millions of refugees who have fled Ukraine since the Russian invasion — through an organization she founded called Activatica.

[00:17:16] **WH:** Well, let’s turn now to that conversation. We began by asking Evgeniya just what Activatica is, and what the group has been doing.

[00:17:24] **Evgeniya Chirikova:** We are Russian activist. We decided to organize an anti-war network. We have very good opportunity to support Ukraine refugees and Ukraine — because, unfortunately, after annexation of Donetsk and Lugansk, of Mariupol, and other parts of Ukraine, Russian troops sent to Russia a huge part of Ukraine population. And these people come through filtration camps without any resources. And our volunteers from our anti-war network help these refugees to escape from Russia to safe countries. And we organize seven shelters: Poland, Estonia, Montenegro, Turkey, Armenia, Georgia and Bulgaria.

[00:18:20] **WH:** You know, being uprooted from your home and your community is a traumatic experience. And in the middle of war, the risks of being injured or losing family members — it must be very, very difficult. What is the state of mind of the refugees you have encountered? What are they dealing with?

[00:18:36] **EC:** Oh, it’s a very important question for us, because a lot of refugees came from occupied territories. And we spoke with these people, and on Activatica you can find some interviews with refugees from Ukraine about their experience — war experience and experience in Russian filtration camps. And, well, we organized food support and humanitarian aid for them and, of course, school for children of Ukraine refugees — for us, it’s extremely important to support them. And we decided to open a special center for Ukrainian refugees with mental problems, because it’s really very, very difficult to support these people. And I try to attract resources for continued working of this shelter, because we have, like, volunteers, and a lot of people have a problem with burnout and very tired, but we continue to help refugees. And



recently we organized support for Ukraine directly. After destroying of peaceful infrastructure by Putin’s rockets and bombs, we made decision to send generators and pills and emergency to cars directly to Ukraine.

[00:20:07] **SP:** Evgeniya, you mentioned there wasn’t really a history of organizing when you were young. And so you sort of created a career, got married, had children, and then suddenly in 2007 with a very calm, stable, happy life, you stepped out of that role and tried to think about becoming an organizer and taking all the risks involved. So, can you tell us a little bit about what led you to suddenly become an environmentalist and what made you at that moment, step forward into the public domain?

[00:20:34] **EC:** Oh, it was an interesting time for me, because I was very pregnant with my second child, and I didn’t have any ideas about grassroots activism. [Laughs.] I was an ordinary businesswoman. And I was very surprised when I had a small walk to a forest with my husband — and we get a very bad surprise when we find information that they decided to cut down 2,000 hectares of forest, Khimki Forest, for a motorway and for infrastructure and development. And we decided to respond, and step by step we organized activity to save Khimki Forest because we found other way to build motorway. And for us, this was a surprised that our authorities organized a horrible campaign against us, ordinary people who only want to save our lovely forest. I never had any experience — grassroots activity — before that, and we tried to find other grassroot movements in Russia, 16 years ago, but it was absolutely impossible. We could not. And I tried to find information about grassroots activity in other countries, and we decided to use the same methods: meetings, rallies, pickets, and we use it, and it was absolutely inspiring experience for us.

[00:22:10] **WH:** Your work started protecting a forest. You began as an environmental activist, but pretty quickly this became a *political* undertaking. Isn’t that, right? So how did that happen and what were the consequences?

[00:22:27] **EC:** At first moment, we did not realize it was a political issue, our grassroots activity. But step by step we realized that we need to take part in election, and we need to change policy of our region. But it was impossible, because when I took part in my election, on Khimki, I could not win — because we have a huge problem with independent election in Russia. And step by step we became a part of a huge new movement, because in 2010, 2011, we have a movement, and we demand to organize a normal election in Russia. And we became a part of this huge movement with Alexei Navalny and Boris Nemtsov, and other opposition leaders, because we are, like, activists, had demand to democratic change and normal institutions.

[00:23:35] **SP:** So, you ended up having to leave Russia for a variety of reasons, and you’re now in Estonia. But I think we’re all aware that Putin is quite willing to reach across borders to continue to crackdown on dissidents. And I can imagine a moment when you must have thought: “Well, maybe I should just stop now. I’m safe, I’m in Estonia.” Why didn’t you at that moment quit? And aren’t you afraid for your safety, your family’s safety, for those you work with — your colleagues, both in Estonia and in Russia?

[00:24:04] **EC:** Well, it’s a good question. Of course, I had a problem with FSB because one day FSB knock at my door and try to take my children from my family and fabricate against me a criminal case of terrorism. And I remember that it was really very difficult because Putin’s regime to organize against me personally and against my friends, grassroots activists. But it was not my reason to move to Estonia. My reason was when Putin’s regime attacked Ukraine — because I realized I don’t want to pay taxes to this aggressive country, and I want to change the type of my activities. I want to organize support of grassroots groups within Russia, but I want to organize in safety, because I realized that I am very, very famous in Putin’s Russia. And I cannot help normally because immediately Putin’s regime attack people who collaborate with me. And we decided to change scheme of our job and we organized [Activatica.org](https://activatica.org). It’s media for sharing information about grassroots activists and important grassroots actions, and at the same time we organized special services for grassroots activists.

[00:25:47] **WH:** Evgeniya, tell us a little bit more about active Activatica. What are its goals? You’ve gone from building up a single-issue grassroots movement to building a kind of network, a hub, for many other grassroots organizations in Russia and in the region. How does it work? Where does your funding come from? And how do you measure success?

[00:26:07] **EC:** Thank you a lot for this question. Our goal was to give a voice for grassroots activists to change the mentality of Russian civil society and to explain that activism is a normal behavior. It’s a good activity. At this moment, we try to share information about any grassroots activity within Russia, and we try to share legal support and mini-grants program and true information about Russian activism. And at this movement, for us, it’s extremely important to change mentality of people who really believe Putin’s propaganda machine.

[00:26:57] **WH:** Wow. Evgeniya, I’m going to take us back a little bit into history because I’m a historian. I know from your biography that you remember the end of the Cold War, and the way that communism collapsed. The Soviet Union fell apart, Europe was changed, and it seemed like a very optimistic moment. Can you tell us a little bit about that turning point in history — what you thought about it at the time and how it influences your work today — this sense of the memory of that era?

[00:27:31] **EC:** I remember this time very good because I was a pupil at a Soviet Union school, and I remember that we don’t have books in our school during the perestroika time. And of course, it impacts my activity now, because I know — I remember Soviet Union time and we had change in my country immediately. And I know that any disgusting regime collapse. And I believe that together we can win, and we can change Russia.

[00:28:08] **WH:** Yeah, so it can happen.

[00:28:09] **EC:** Yes. And I hope that we, in the future, we are organize a normal, democratic Russia. It’s possible — because at first moment after collapse of Soviet Union, we — ordinary Russians — didn’t have any experience with organizing something. But at this moment we have skills of organization. For example, at this movement we have a very strong antiwar movement, and a lot of Russian activists take a big part in this activity. And I hope that these skills help us to

show a normal face of Russia, because Russia is not the aggressive face of Putin’s regime. We have a lot of normal people.

[00:29:01] **SP:** Certainly, Russia has had a very troubled relationship with democracy. But can you imagine a democratic future for Russia? And is there any way you think the Ukrainian war and the, sort of, the activism against it might ultimately help produce that future?

[00:29:16] **EC:** Oh, it’s my big dream to return to Russia and organize a normal democratic state. And I believe thanks to our activity, like grassroots activists in our anti-war network, it’s helped us — it’s given us a special skills for building of new democracy in Russia. Why it’s possible? Because we — Russian activists — have to demand democratic change of Russian people within Russia. And I believe that we Russian activists will return from Europe, from America, with this knowledge. For example, I have lived during eight years in an excellent democratic country, Estonia. And I hope that I can use these skills on my motherland, on Russia. It’s my dream.

[00:30:20] **SP:** Evgeniya Chirikova, thank you so much for taking time to talk to us today on *Democracy in Danger*. And I just want to say again how much we admire and appreciate the work that you’re doing.

[00:30:29] **EC:** Oh, thank you a lot. Thank you. And have a nice day.

### [TRANSITION MUSIC IN]

[00:30:39] **WH:** Evgeniya Chirikova is a founder of [Activatica.org](https://activatica.org), a Russian language portal for pro-democracy activists and journalists. In 2012, she received the Goldman Environmental Prize for her defense of Khimki Forest and was named by Foreign Policy Magazine as a top global thinker. She resides currently in Tallinn, Estonia, with her husband and their two daughters.

[00:31:03] **SP:** *Democracy in Danger* is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit [democracygroup.org](https://democracygroup.org) to find all our sister shows. We’ll be right back.

### [TRANSITION MUSIC OUT]

[00:31:22] **WH:** Steve, that’s a remarkable conversation with some truly inspirational young people. And I just wanted to know — from your experience, with so many activists that you’ve collaborated with, you know, what makes them tick? These young people have maintained such a positive demeanor. Their outlook is not negative. It seems as if they’re unbelievably optimistic, given the horrors that they’ve endured, the traumas, the moving from one city to another, being in exile. How do they come to this sense of commitment and bring such positive energy?

[00:31:59] **SP:** You know, I think as I work with advocates, there’s sort of two buckets in a sense. There’s the individual who grew up wanting to be political= — studied political philosophy, joined a political party — and that’s been their reason for being almost since birth. But there’s another set, and I think it’s the far larger set, and it’s people who get motivated by

what they think of as a noncontroversial issue. Like, it’s a book club, it’s a culture club, it’s the environment, you know, it’s like wanting to save trees. And as they start the process, they begin to feel, like, the authoritarian clapback.

[00:32:33] And I think a couple of things happen there all at once. One, I think they realize that, sort of, authority will come down on them, but they can survive. I mean, Evgeniya was going to lose her kids, she didn’t lose her kids. So, she begins to realize that what is seemingly a monolithic, immense power actually has fractures and weaknesses in it. And I think the other thing is that as they realize there are fractures and weaknesses, they begin to see that they’re not alone, that there are other people who feel this way. And as those people coalesce and have that consistent experience of surviving the repression, they begin to, sort of, have what we call courage.

[00:33:11] I have a very good friend who said, when he was first arrested, if they put him in jail for two weeks, he never would have been an activist again — because he was so afraid. But they put him in jail for five years, and he realized he could survive. And once he realized he’d survive, he became very dangerous to the authoritarian leaders.

[00:33:29] **WH:** Steve, Diana is in Kharkiv, a few miles from the front. She’s 16 years old. She’s still maintaining her schoolwork to the extent that she can and to the extent she has electricity to do it. She’s beginning to offer online counseling services or at least set up facilities for that. And her voice is so filled with a sense of positivity and a sense of enthusiasm.

[00:33:53] **SP:** You know, this is something I think doesn’t get talked about enough: that the advocates I talk to, and Diana is a perfect example of that, find incredible joy and meaning in what they’re doing. Evgeniya says that, you know, she is her happiest when she is doing this. And you can hear the joy in Diana’s voice. So, I think sometimes we imagine advocacy is this horrific daily experience — and there are certainly horrible moments — but we’re missing that, like, the act of working for others and the work of justice, for human rights, for the betterment of democracy, fills you with joy and purpose. That is something we should think about when we hear the voice of Evgeniya and we hear Diana.

[00:34:30] **WH:** You know, that sense of courage that you talk about and the sense of purpose that comes out in these young activists — certainly, I think, people in the West have looked to Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelensky, and felt a degree of admiration for his courage in the face of unspeakable challenges. It’ll be decades before Ukraine can get back up on its feet. But there’s another thread that runs through Ukraine’s tragedy, and that is the way that the Western world has responded, in part to Zelensky’s courage, but also to the plight of Ukrainians. So, NATO is beginning to expand its numbers into the notoriously independent and neutral Scandinavian world. The West has come together and spent billions on economic aid and on military aid to supply Ukraine with weapons and with food and other resources. The allies are speaking a common language of moral purpose, of saving democracy, in the face of Russian brutality.

[00:35:26] **SP:** I do admire how the West has come together to support Ukraine. And I do think there’s been a revitalization of the notion of saving democracy. But out of respect for the

advocates I work with in Myanmar and in Syria, I just want to note that the reanimation of democracy is “Western democracy,” from what I can tell — because you have China, and you have Russia actively supporting the military regime in Myanmar. And the U.S. has done little or nothing to support people who are suffering equal, if not worse, human rights violations from the military ruling authority. You have sort of a dissipation of interest in Syria, sort of an acceptance that Assad is going to stay in power at the cost, deep human cost, of the people who live in Syria and the Kurds who are sort of living on the edge of Syria and Turkey. So, although I admire what the West has done for Ukraine, I think we need to think about it in a global context and think about whether we’re letting go of our commitment to democracy.

## [THEME MUSIC]

[00:36:25] **WH:** That does it for this episode. We’ll be back in two weeks’ time with legal scholar Bertrall Ross, and we’ll ask Bertrall what’s going on with our own electoral systems in the United States.

[00:36:38] **Show tape, Bertrall Ross:** Voter suppression arises in contexts where there is fear of democratic change, and your fear of democratic change leads you to redirect that fear towards the election process itself.

[00:36:52] **SP:** You can find us on Twitter in the meantime [@DinDpodcast](#) — that’s D-I-N-D podcast. Drop us a line. We want to hear from you.

[00:37:01] **WH:** You can also visit our webpage: [dindanger.org](#). We’ve got show notes, links to Diana’s essay, stuff we’re reading, and powerful images for each episode.

[00:37:11] **SP:** *Democracy in Danger* is produced by Robert Armengol and Rebecca Barry. Elie Bashkow engineers the show. Our interns are Eva Kretsinger-Walters, Ellis Nolan and Bea Webster.

Special thanks this time to Diana’s teacher, Nataliia Babicheva.

[00:37:26] **WH:** Support comes from the University of Virginia’s College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVa’s Karsh Institute of Democracy. We’re distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I’m Will Hitchcock.

[00:37:40] **SP:** And I’m Steve Parks. Siva will be back next time.